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# The Salem Witch Project

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The authors' central claim, they tell us, is that meaning discourse is radically normative, rather than descriptive. In the Introduction they say,

The received view is that the grammar of meaning claims is descriptive. It is our purpose in what follows to deny this consensus.... We offer, instead, a radically normative position on meaning claims. That is, we do not content ourselves with the relatively common view that part of the pattern characterized in ascribing meanings is the structure of socially accepted norms of a society. Rather, we claim that the very speech act of making a meaning claim is itself normative, that sayi*n Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*<sup>rt</sup>, the grammar of meaning is normative Vol. LXV, No. 1, July 2002

Although the book is very long, with extended discussions that draw upon the authors' prior writings and are devoted to various aspects of what they euphemistically call "ground-clearing," their case for the radical normativity of meaning discourse rests heavily on one key argument, presented fairly briefly in the first chapter. The argument employs a thought experiment about translation that we will call the Salem Witch Project. We will focus on this argument and explain why we do not find it persuasive.

## 1. Preliminaries.

Some brief remarks will clear the ground for the points to follow. First, it will be useful to have before us a plausible-looking general view about meaning discourse, which we call *the default view*. Roughly and generically, the default view asserts that paradigmatic uses of meaning discourse are indeed descriptive, and that what they report are facts to the effect that *certain ways of using language are semantically sanctioned according to socially accepted norms that are constitutive of a given language*.

Second, the authors often write in a way that is ambiguous as between the default view on the one hand, and prescriptivism about meaning discourse on the other hand. For instance, early on they say:

Broadly speaking, our aim in writing this book was to think through an inferentialist approach to talk about meaning.... Sellars' version of inferentialism tells us that the meaning of a claim is its inferential role and that to report on the meaning of a claim is to report on its inferential role.... It struck us that a far more plausible starting-point for an account of talk about meaning would be achieved if one took meaning claims as asserting a normative propriety concerning what *ought to be* inferred from what (pp. 8-9).

The last sentence in this passage illustrates the ambiguity. On one construal, it articulates an inferentialist version of the default view—a version saying that meaning claims are reports, and that what they report are facts about which inferential roles are sanctioned by the semantic standards constitutive of a given language. On the other construal, the sentence articulates an inferentialist version of the radical prescriptivism they initially tell us they intend to defend. We will call the view answering to the first construal *propriety-citing inferentialist descriptivism*—for short, PCI descriptivism. We will call the view answering to the second construal *inferentialist prescriptivism*. We take it that the authors mean to be defending inferentialist prescriptivism, and to be rejecting PCI descriptivism along with all other forms of descriptivism.

Third, it should be noted that if indeed meaning claims are reports of the kind that PCI descriptivism says they are, then even though they are descriptive, they nonetheless function as “inference licenses” and “censure licenses.” The license to make a certain inference comes from the fact reported—viz., a fact to the effect that the relevant kind of inference is sanctioned by certain of the normative semantic standards constitutive of the language. Likewise, the license to partially exclude from the discourse community those who do not recognize the propriety of the inference comes from the fact reported by the meaning claim. Thus, contrary to what the authors sometimes suggest (e.g., pp. 58-59, pp. 64-65), meaning claims need not be prescriptions themselves in order to function as inference licenses and censure licenses.

## **2. The Salem Witch Project, the Default View, and Radical Prescriptivism.**

In Chapter 1 the authors offer their principal argument for radical prescriptivism about meaning discourse. Their initial gloss on the argument they will give is this:

We argue that the correctness of translation is highly dependent on features of the language, general beliefs, and social and physical environment of the translator. This dependency shows that there are cases—indeed, thoroughly common ones—in which two different translators from different linguistic communities are such that the one would correctly translate a given term in a way that was incompatible with the translation that the other would give. This phenomenon, and the semantic intuitions surrounding it, can be made good sense of, we suggest, by recognizing that meaning talk is a normative project, whose goal is, in some important sense, to form one large community out of two. (p. 21)

We will call the phenomenon mentioned in the second sentence *the indexicality of translation*. (They themselves call it “the indexicality of meaning.”) The argument, like most interesting philosophical arguments, is nondemonstrative. The idea is this: the indexicality of translation is a phenomenon requiring accommodation, and prescriptivism about meaning discourse provides a natural and plausible way of doing so, whereas descriptivism about meaning discourse fails to do so.<sup>1</sup>

The thesis we are here calling the indexicality of translation is officially characterized by the authors this way:

There can be three languages, L, L1, L2 and their respective linguistic communities, such that

- (1) Were translators of L to translate a term *a* of L2, they would correctly translate it as *b*,
- (2) Were translators of L1 to translate a term *a* of L2, they would correctly translate it as *c*, and
- (3) These translations are incompatible in the sense that translators of L could not correctly translate *c* as *b*, and further, that different sentences—indeed, different observation sentences (in the Quinean sense of the term)—of L2 come out true under the respective translations. (p. 44)

The authors’ principal example of this phenomenon is a thought-experimental scenario that we here dub the *Salem Witch Project*, since it involves a two-faceted translation project vis-à-vis the word ‘witch’ as employed in a hypothetical Salem, Massachusetts in the 1600’s—a place much like the actual Salem of the 1600’s, although altered to suit the authors’ needs. Some of the women in this community engage themselves with mystical arts such as spell-casting, summoning spirits, performing magical dance rituals, and such. These women refer to themselves as “witches.” In addition to spell-casting, the witches of Salem have also developed practices of herbal medicine, feminist psychology, and midwifery. Finally, there is no real magic in Salem; nobody has genuine magical powers.

Having described the community of Salem, the authors ask us to imagine that two translators from two very different communities have come to Salem. The first translator comes from the Land of Faerie, a place where magic works. At one point in the history of Faerie there were women much like the witches of Salem. In the meantime the inhabitants of Faerie have developed the arcane arts to a high level of sophistication. Magic-users in Faerie are able to use their powers to heal the sick, to protect crops from

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<sup>1</sup> How exactly prescriptivism is supposed to accommodate this phenomenon, and why exactly descriptivism allegedly cannot do so, are not articulated by the authors in any crisp or concise way—although various relevant things are said in Chapter 1.

disease, to summon demons, and to change the weather. Furthermore, they are able to distinguish true witches like themselves from those types of psychologists, herbalists, and knowledgeable farmers who were thought to be witches at an earlier period in Faerie history but lacked the requisite magical powers.

The second translator comes from the Land of Science, a place where magic does not work. People here have developed highly sophisticated non-magical practices such as physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and medicine. Here, too, at one point in history there were women much like the witches of Salem. These women were successful at fighting off Christian persecution, and they eventually gained the right to practice their arts openly. As time went on, the witches began to realize that the arcane components of their rituals were insignificant, and they began to focus their energies on the development of feminist psychology and herbal medicine. Witchcraft remained a separate and respectable institution, despite the abandonment of its early attention to magic.

Both translators translate the Salemite word ‘witch’ homophonetically, in terms of the Faerie word ‘witch’ and the Science Land word ‘witch’ respectively. Both translations are correct, say the authors, even though they are not equivalent. (The Faerie word ‘witch’ means something like ‘magic user’, whereas the Science Land word ‘witch’ means something more like ‘feminist nature-scientist’.) Furthermore, although the two translations are equally correct, they are incompatible; for, the sentence ‘There are witches in Salem’ of the Salemite language gets translated by the Faerie translator into a false sentence of the Faerie language, whereas this same sentence of the Salemite language gets translated by the Science Land translator into a true sentence of the Science Land language. Thus, say the authors, the scenario here described demonstrates the thesis we are calling the indexicality of translation.

We will grant this thesis for argument’s sake (but also because we find it plausible); and we will also grant that the hypothetical Salem Witch Project scenario is an instance of the indexicality of translation.<sup>2</sup> However, we maintain that this phenomenon can be accommodated by sufficiently nuanced versions of descriptivism about meaning—and hence that, contrary to the authors, the phenomenon does not constitute strong grounds for radical prescriptivism about meaning discourse.

How might PCI descriptivism accommodate the indexicality of translation? (We focus on PCI descriptivism for concreteness, and also because the authors themselves are writing within the tradition of Sellarsian inferential-

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<sup>2</sup> However, we emphatically do not grant the authors their label “the indexicality of meaning” for this thesis and the phenomenon it posits. That label strongly suggests that, to the extent that a given sentence of a particular language is susceptible to incompatible translations into other languages, there is no objective fact of the matter about what the sentence means. In light of what we say below, this suggestion is unwarranted.

ism about meaning; but what we will say should generalize to other versions of the default view, *mutatis mutandis*.) First, it needs to be acknowledged that meaning is something that can retain its identity while changing in certain respects—just as many other kinds of things (e.g., trees, persons, universities, etc.) can persist through change. *Identity-preserving alteration of meaning*, as we will call it, occurs frequently in the diachronic evolution of language, and for a variety of reasons, often as a result of the effects of wider social, cultural, or scientific evolution. From the perspective of PCI descriptivism, this diachronic phenomenon can be described roughly as follows. On the one hand, the constitutive semantic standards of the language at time  $t$ , together with the constitutive semantic standards of the same language at a later time  $t+\delta$ , jointly sanction diachronic transitions between statements at  $t$  employing the given word(s), and homophonetically indistinguishable statements at  $t+\delta$ ; thus, there is diachronic identity of meaning between the relevant words at  $t$  and at  $t+\delta$ . On the other hand, there are certain differences between the synchronic inferential transitions involving the given word(s) that are sanctioned by the semantic standards operative at  $t$ , and the synchronic inferential transitions involving those same word(s) that are sanctioned by the semantic standards operative at  $t+\delta$ ; thus, the given word(s) undergo (identity-preserving) diachronic alteration of meaning between times  $t$  and  $t+\delta$ .

Second, it also needs to be acknowledged that identity-preserving alteration of meaning sometimes also occurs synchronically and interlinguistically, in the process of optimal translation. After all, sometimes this kind of meaning-altering translation is the best that can be had, given the linguistic resources of the two languages involved. From the perspective of PCI descriptivism, this phenomenon can be described similarly to the intralinguistic diachronic case, roughly as follows. On the one hand, the constitutive semantic standards of the target language L1 (at time  $t$ ), together with the constitutive semantic standards of the translator's language L2 (at  $t$ ), jointly sanction suitable two-way interlinguistic inferential transitions involving statement S1 in L1 and statement S2 in L2—so that there is interlinguistic identity of meaning between the paired sentences in L1 and L2. Metalinguistic, translational, meaning claims in L2 report these semantically sanctioned interlinguistic inferential connections (thereby effecting translation). On the other hand, there are certain differences between the intralinguistic S1-involving inferential transitions in L1 that are semantically sanctioned by the semantic standards of L1, and the intralinguistic S2-involving inferential transitions in L2 that are semantically sanctioned by the semantic standards of L2; thus,

there is an (identity-preserving) synchronic alteration of meaning in the translation of S1 in L1 into S2 of L2.<sup>3, 4</sup>

Third, in light of cases like the Salem Witch Project, it further needs to be acknowledged that sometimes two different translators from different linguistic communities are such that the one would correctly translate a given term in a way that was incompatible with the correct translation that the other would give. For instance, presumably the term ‘witch’, as employed in the Salemite language, is sufficiently vague that there is no determinate fact of the matter about whether or not it refers to anyone in Salem.<sup>5</sup> An optimal translation of the Salemite word ‘witch’ into the language spoken in the Land of Faerie will correctly report the interlinguistic identity of meaning between the Salemite word and the orthographically identical Faerie word, but also will introduce an identity-preserving alteration of meaning that partially resolves the vagueness of the Salemite word. So, since the Faerie word ‘witch’ has no referents in Salem, the correct Faerie translation of the Salemite sentence ‘There are witches in Salem’ will be a false sentence, whereas the original Salemite sentence is neither true nor false (because of the extent of the vagueness of the Salemite word ‘witch’). On the other hand, an optimal translation of the Salemite word ‘witch’ into the language spoken in the Land of Science will correctly report the interlinguistic identity of meaning between the Salemite word and the orthographically identical Science Land word, while also introducing a *different and incompatible* identity-

<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, the interlinguistic, synchronic, kind of identity-preserving alteration of meaning sometimes involved in translation can contribute to the intra-linguistic, diachronic, kind of identity-preserving alteration of meaning that sometimes occurs in the evolution a given language. On p. 48 of the text, the authors offer two cases that are both most naturally construed as involving such a causal interaction. In the first example, the people of Salem come into contact with linguists from Faerie, and as a result the Salemite term ‘witch’ gradually alters its meaning to coincide with that of the Faerie term ‘witch’. In the second example, as a result of contact with linguists from the Land of Science, the Salemite word ‘witch’ gradually alters its meaning to coincide with that of the Science word ‘witch’.

<sup>4</sup> It is plausible that the notion of identity-preserving alteration of meaning, in both the diachronic intralinguistic version and the synchronic interlinguistic version, is governed by a contextually variable parameter that is sensitive to local communicative needs and purposes. What counts as identity of meaning—i.e., what kinds of alterations of meaning count as identity-preserving—is probably a context-sensitive matter.

<sup>5</sup> This is the most natural construal of the situation as the authors describe it, because they are at pains to counterbalance any factors that could tip the scales one way or the other as to whether, as the word ‘witch’ is used in the Salemite language, there could be a witch who was not capable of using magic. The authors say, for instance, that “there is no clear line between the spells and herbal treatments, for many of the spells involve potions incorporating the herbs, while many of the cures are given while chanting, drawing mystic symbols, and so forth. In short, the system is a complex mixture of primitive medical, agricultural, and psychological science and magical lore” (p. 45). And a few pages later they add that the people of Salem “treat the activities of their “witches” as a seamless whole. As we would put it, scientific and mystic activities are on a par for the people of Salem; they do not form distinct kinds” (p. 50).

preserving alteration of meaning, one that partially resolves the vagueness of the Salemite word in a different way. So, since the Science Land word 'witch' has referents in Salem, the correct Science Land translation of the Salemite sentence 'There are witches in Salem' will be a true sentence.

The general point we are making about the Salem Witch Project does not necessarily require the assumption that the Salemite word 'witch' is so vague that there is no fact of the matter about whether or not it has referents in Salem. Suppose, for instance, that 'witch' is used by the Salemites in such a way that nobody could be a witch who lacked magical powers. Even so, arguably the correct and optimal translation of the Salemite word 'witch' into the language spoken in the Land of Science will be in terms of the Science Land word 'witch' (although there is room for debate about this). Insofar as this translation *is* correct, this is because it reports a interlinguistic identity of meaning, while also introducing an identity-preserving alteration of meaning under which the translating word (viz., the Science Land word 'witch') has different referential status than the translated word. The Salemite word has no referents in Salem, whereas the Science Land word does have referents in Salem.<sup>6</sup>

The upshot of these observations is that a sufficiently nuanced version of PCI descriptivism—or of the more generic kind of descriptivism we are calling the default view—can accommodate the indexicality of translation.<sup>7</sup> It is an important phenomenon, and the Salem Witch Project nicely illustrates it. But since the default view can make good sense of it, there is no need to invoke the contention that meaning discourse is normative rather than

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<sup>6</sup> Compare the discussion of the diachronic evolution of the term 'momentum', quoted approvingly by the authors on p. 54, in Hilary Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 9-10. In Newtonian physics, 'momentum' was defined as "mass times velocity"; thus, this term was originally used in such a way that no magnitude failing to satisfy this definition could be the referent of 'momentum'. With the appearance of Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity, the term evidently underwent what we are here calling an identity-preserving alteration of meaning, one that changed the referent of 'momentum' from mass-times-velocity to a somewhat different magnitude—one that plays a theoretical role within relativistic physics much like the role played within Newtonian physics by mass-times-velocity. The statement that momentum is mass times velocity, which originally was true by definition, was now false.

<sup>7</sup> The authors sometimes suggest (e.g., pp. 62-62) that descriptivism could accommodate the indexicality of translation only by adopting the implausible tactic of treating meaning claims as implicit predictions about the future behavior of linguistic interpreters. However, since future usage in one's own language or in an interpreter's language might include all kinds of currently unanticipated identity-preserving alterations of meaning, a version of descriptivism that acknowledges the possibility of identity-preserving alteration of meaning will *not* construe meaning claims as implicit predictions about future usage or about the future behavior of linguistic interpreters.



descriptive.<sup>8</sup> Thus the Salem Witch Project does not provide a convincing reason to accept the radical prescriptivism advocated by the authors.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, there do occur situations in which some kind of locally agreed-upon prescription about meaning is called for, in order to prevent local breakdown in communication. The authors provide an example on pp. 102-03: a discussion between Julia, who maintains that there are witches in the next town who cured her neighbor, and Van, who denies that there are any witches in the world. In order to sort verbal from substantive issues, Van finally says, "Let's agree that 'witch' means anyone who is of the particular socially defined class of purported religious healers in your pagan society of which your friend is an example." (He then rephrases his substantive contention, as the claim that there are no people who cast spells that sometimes work.) But two points deserve stressing about such cases. First, local meaning prescription typically is accomplished not by meaning discourse *by itself*, but rather by meaning discourse in combination with overtly prescriptive language such as "Let's agree that..." (Van's prescription is a case in point.) Second, it would be a fallacy—an egregiously hasty generalization—to conclude from the existence of such cases that *typical* meaning discourse is prescriptive rather than descriptive.

<sup>9</sup> We thank Mark Timmons for helpful comments and discussion.